

- EDITORIAL -

Special Issue: music/media/politics

Rosemary Overell and Oli Wilson

This collection arises from the *music/media/politics* symposium hosted by the Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago in April 2014.

In February 2014, Stuart Hall passed away and, even in our antipodean outpost (!) we were affected. There were informal discussions in hallways, over coffees and in seminars about the broader project of cultural studies which Hall had spearheaded. For many in the media department at Otago, his radical writings on popular culture as a site of hegemonic struggle (particularly 'Notes on deconstructing the popular' [1981]) were key inspirations for an academic career. Recent circumspection in media/cultural studies around the apparent erosion of the critical-political project laid out by Hall and the original cultural studies cohort (Turner 2012), provided further inspiration for us to join forces with the Tertiary Education Union and student radio station Radio 1 to host a symposium. *music/ media/politics* explored our potential to enact social change through academic work—being connected, and committed, to organised political activity. The keynote speaker for the symposium was radical hip hop artist and activist Boots Riley. This event, and Riley's keynote, were intended to intervene in the standard academic 'genre' of conferences and symposia—to speak to a broad, working-class and student, as well as academic audience about the power of the media to shape and shift cultural contexts for political ends. In this regards, our move away from the norm of expensive registration fees and siloed events was deliberate. As Turner and others have pointed out, the imperative to publish means that almost any *text* can be read as resistant by some academic clever enough to *read* it 'correctly'. Riley's work on the other hand, embodies the grass-roots struggle over hegemony and, for the conference,

Rosemary Overell (rosemary.overell@otago.ac.nz) is a lecturer in the Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago. Coming out of cultural studies of popular music, she recently published *Affective Intensities in Extreme Music Scenes* (Palgrave, 2014).

Oli Wilson is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Music and Creative Media Production at Massey University, Wellington. He is currently Programme Leader of the School's Bachelor of Commercial Music degree. His main area of research is music in Oceania, and he has published on the recording industry and popular music cultures in Papua New Guinea, Dunedin (NZ) indie rock production, and New Zealand post-colonial identity politics.

offered the chance to re-evaluate how the politics laid out by Hall may be enacted in meaningful ways.

To an audience of almost five hundred people, Riley began with a rap, but then turned to a polemic, which addressed 'Hip Hop and the Class Struggle'. He echoed Hall in his emphasis that all popular cultural production is political and argued that the truism that hip hop has 'lost its way' neglects the context and violence inherent to late capital. 'Gangster' rap, for example, represents the brutality of the dominant economic system. The violence meted out on hip hop tracks, 'has nothing to do with falters in communication in black communities. It has nothing to do with "maleness". It has everything to do with the way that the system is organised'. Such was the impact of Riley's speech that he fielded questions for over an hour in the auditorium and in the foyer of the building.

Our intention in this special issue of *MEDIANZ* is to address the imperatives Riley laid out in his keynote, and continue the momentum that the event generated. It is appropriate therefore that the issue's first article engages in a dialogue with Boots Riley himself. Alongside reflections on his experience in Aotearoa, Riley describes to Rosemary Overell his recent experiences with Podemos in Greece and his encounters with striking Coca Cola workers in Spain. Riley's activism is impossible to detach from his music production and participation. For him, creative and mediated practice is imperative for the articulation and representation of contemporary struggle. Most recently, Riley has explored these themes in his screenplay *Sorry to Bother You* (2014)—a comedic critique of exploitation of precarious workers in telecommunications. Riley also reflects on the fraught politics of representation in the (new) mediated context. Specifically, he warns that the spate of phone-filmed acts of violence by white police against persons of colour in the USA does not guarantee transparency, or a challenge to institutionalised racism. He notes that 'without a movement that can actually change the way our system works, [viral videos] just serve as a warning to people to listen to the police'. Media can spread a message and represent atrocities, but its embeddedness in activist politics is crucial. The inclusion of an interview with a musician and activist may seem curious for an academic publication. But the entanglement of media criticism with politics, in organised, grassroots forms was a driving force behind the symposium and this special issue. It also reflects a growing concern among media scholars—that critical thought isn't solely the exclusive domain of academics.

The following articles develop some of these themes further by offering a broad interpretation of the ways music, media and politics intersect. This collection also reflects a diverse application of research methods, including critical text-based analysis, music and musician-focused ethnographies, and reviews of historical discourses. While geographic scopes vary, the issue's international focus indicates wide engagement with

global media politics, especially as they relate to our contemporary colonial positionality, and past.

In the first article, Catherine Hoad interrogates the taken-for-granted assumption that heavy metal is necessarily white through an analysis of the excription of non-white bodies in metal scenes in Norway, Australia and South Africa. Hoad's work provides a powerful intervention into the politics of (post)colonialism and race in global metal which moves beyond the explicit and spectacular racism of, for example, National Socialist Black Metal associated with Burzum and Varg Vikernes to account for the latent 'natural' whiteness of much extreme metal. Hoad makes room for the mediated politics of metal in her three country-based case studies through an elaboration of how nationalism operates in ordinary (though 'banal' in Australia's case) forms.

An ethnographic scene-centred approach is also applied by Paul McMillan, who draws on first-hand experience among peers for his study of 'covers musicians' in Dunedin, New Zealand. McMillan explores the politics surrounding local musicians' notions of identity as 'covers' and 'originals musicians'. The setting for this study is noteworthy, as Dunedin is renowned for its DIY indie music scene, which achieved international recognition during the late 1980s and early 1990s. He argues that many young originals musicians regularly perform in covers-only contexts for mainstream audiences, and that these comparatively well-paid performances help sustain their originals endeavours. These musicians consciously challenge ideas about authenticity that have been established through mediatised representations of the indie rock scene in Dunedin, and are sustained through the discourses among some originals-only musicians. McMillan's article provides a contrasting narrative to previous academic studies of Dunedin music, which he argues perpetuate an outmoded notion of the authentic indie musician. The complex identities of many young Dunedin artists, it is argued, both embrace and subvert the dominant 'stigma' attached to covering, and view the job as complementary to their other musical ambitions.

Indigenous and Pacific cultural politics are also addressed in two articles. In the first, Jen Cattermole questions the extent to which indigenous perspectives and agency are reflected in government initiatives for supporting popular music and culture in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia. Her comparison addresses previous calls in ethnomusicology to consider and compare indigenous issues across these post-colonial contexts. Cattermole explores specific administrative and policy frameworks in both countries, and concludes by suggesting that although indigenous perspectives have gained increasing recognition, government frameworks remain a site for contemporary cultural and socio-political struggle. These struggles take different forms in each context. For example, Cattermole notes that Māori political power and influence on policy has increased, whereas Australian Aboriginal peoples remain sidelined and have little or no real political influence. Annalise Friend provides a reading of the Samoan Aotearoa-New Zealander vocalist Ladió's 'brand' by analysing the presentation and

packaging of her physical albums, music videos, online presence, merchandising, and live persona. Friend identifies parallels with meanings found in other pop-culture trends including hip hop, soul, reggae, and electronic music, while grounding the analysis in a local context. She argues that Ladi6 constructs a form of self-reflexive 'ladyspace' that embodies her position as a Pacific Island woman in both an ambiguous and reflexive way. Friend concludes that in this case, branding functions in accordance with the logic of global capitalism, where the practice of consumption restricts alternative ways of engaging with cultural texts.

Contemporary nation building and identity politics are explored by Henry Johnson, who examines the events surrounding a competition to find a new anthem for the small British Island of Jersey in 2007. While remaining a British crown territory, Jersey is a separate fiscal, legal and political entity and has its own distinct regional and local identity. However, Johnson shows that Jersey has been rethinking its position in relation to Britain, as evidenced through media, political and cultural spheres that engage with the topic of the national anthem. Johnson applies media analysis, as well as ethnographic research comprising informal interviews with a broad range of individuals including musicians, composers, language activists and educators. The case study serves to examine the ways music, media and politics are played out in discourse before, during and after the process of choosing a new anthem.

National identity politics is explored further by Rob Burns, who focuses more broadly on the United Kingdom. Specifically, he explores contemporary discourses around English identity by drawing on the work and media-narratives presented by UK folk musicians, principally the political activist Billy Bragg. Burns' research is informed by interviews with Bragg, and builds upon his previous work on folk music and nationalism. The perspective of folk musicians is attributed special significance, as historically they fulfilled functions as media sources through which news of national events were disseminated. Burns argues that this tradition has continued as contemporary folk musicians frequently both discuss historical events, and provide commentary on current political issues. Burns' focus is on folk musicians' perspectives on the gradual 'devolution' of the UK. Bragg, among others, note that Englishness does not enjoy the political representation experienced by other UK nations, yet the notion of Englishness remains key to English cultural arts and traditions, particularly within the folk music canon.

The final three articles adopt text-based analytical approaches. Jonathan Marshall's piece – a historiography of hip-hop in the USA and France – provides a provocative account of 'hip hop radiophonics' as a mode of 'dialectical acoustic installation'. Here, Marshall argues that hip-hop from the 1980s and 1990s is best understood as a 'boom' (dialectical clash) between spatiality and acoustics ranging multidirectionally across historic formations. Drawing on Eshun's (2003) AfroFuturism, Marshall ranges from the *banlieue* of Paris, to mid-century North Africa, to the graffitied streets of New York to

make the provocation that Gilroy's famous 'Black Atlantic' model is insufficient an account for take up of hip-hop forms in Europe.

Peter Stapleton looks at cinematic representations of rock music. He proposes that 1980s 'punkmentaries' like *D.O.A.* (Kowalski, 1980) and *Punk Rock Movie* (Letts, 1978) viscerally embody the ethos of the punk scene. He describes how such films work as Bakhtinian 'chronotopes' which visibilise an inverted space-time in relation to the reactionary mode of the 1960s and 1970s 'rockumentary'. Stapleton takes *Gimme Shelter* (Mayles, Mayles and Zwerin, 1970) as a transitional moment where the inversion between rock- and punk-umentary occurs. The chronotope (time-space) of the filmic object swaps around the idealism and apparent utopianism of the 60s' 'Summer of Love' spirit to lay bare the brutality of late capitalism ascendent by the 1980s. Stapleton argues that the punkumentary is carnivalesque—a materialised embodiment of 'chaotic punk time-space'.

The final article, by Alison Blair, also draws on Bakhtin to elaborate a textual analysis of a music scene—in this case, glam rock. She uses Bakhtin's concept of the 'masque' to look particularly at Marc Bolan and David Bowie as represented in 1970s popular media and video clips. Blair posits that Bolan and Bowie's performative personae—like the punkumentary described by Stapleton—operate as a mode of inversion and suspension of normative hierarchies. Conventional heterosexism, in particular, is challenged through the masque-ing articulated by glam rock. Blair argues that Bolan and Bowie do this primarily via a destabilising of the 'authenticity', favoured by progressive rock and folk music, through an emphasis on the performative aspects of glam musical production.

This special issue draws together a diverse range of encounters between music—as a culturally significant media form—and politics. Boots Riley's stirring keynote reminded us of the importance of praxis as the necessary outcome of theoretical critique. Whether that praxis is creative, as it is for Riley declaring: 'my music is based on what I think is needed in the world', or takes the form of engaged academic output, the imperative of connecting cultural production with progressive politics remains essential.

References

- Eshun, Kodwo. 2003. 'Further Considerations of Afrofuturism'. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2): 287-302.
- Hall, Stuart. 1981. 'Notes on deconstructing the popular'. In *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by Raphael Samuel. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 227-240.
- Jutel, Olivier. 2014. 'Interview: Boots Riley.' *Critic Te Arohi*.
- Kowalski, Lech. 1980. *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage*. Lightning Video.

Letts, Don. 1978. *The Punk Rock Movie*.

Mayles, Albert, David Mayles and Charlotte Zwerin. 1970. *Gimme Shelter*. Mayles Films.

Riley, Boots. 2014. *Sorry to Bother You*. San Francisco: McSweeney's.

Turner, Graeme. 2012. *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* London: Sage.